

seconds, minutes, hours, lifetimes

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by [meridies](#)

Summary

After high school ends, Dream makes the torturous decision to go on a road trip across the country with his best friend and longtime crush. He doesn't think it can get any worse.

Notes

prompt for today was unrequited love, so have this lovely road trip au!!

this fic has been translated into chinese! the translation can be found [here](#).

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“That constellation there—” Hands, tracing the stars— “That’s Orion.”

“The belt?”

George turns and grins, hands falling to his side. “The belt.”

“Show me another one,” Dream says. The fire in front of them crackles, spits sparks. He prods it with a stick and watches the embers flare.

George points up again, all long lines and thin knuckles. “See that bright star there?”

Dream nods, as if he does.

“It’s the beginning of Ursa Major. The big bear. It’s part of the Big Dipper too, see there?”

Dream nods again, as if he does.

“And if you follow that line, you get to the head of the bear.” George attempts to point out a few more nonsensical star patterns, before dropping his hands. He turns his attention back to the fire in front of them. “It’s a stick figure. You really have to imagine to make it look like a bear.”

This far out in the countryside, the stars spill overhead endlessly, buckets and buckets of them. The sky itself is more star than black. The moon, blessedly wide, sends light over the desert. Dream lays back on the mattress they’ve laid out in the back and relaxes, piece by piece, into the earth.

He can see the faint green light from the glow-in-the-dark stars George stuck to the van ceiling. Two days into their road trip, George bought their own bucket of glow-in-the-dark stars from a discount Walmart, and taped them up in swirling, backhanded patterns. Dream raised a cynical eyebrow and called them tacky. In response, George peeled the backing off one and stuck it to the dashboard.

Now, he looks up at them, instead of the actual sky, and asks, “Do you have a favorite?”

George, sitting on the opposite side of the fire, tilts his head and peers up. “I like Cygnus. The swan.” He traces a few more lines, before slumping back. “It has the brightest stars.”

“My favorite constellation is the Freckles,” says Dream, after a moment’s consideration.

George frowns. “What?”

“Just pick a few stars at random and there you go,” says Dream, and ignores George’s delighted laugh. “It’s the easiest one to spot.”

“That’s cheating. That’s *so* cheating. This entire sky is the Freckles, then.”

“That’s the point.”

George rolls his eyes, kicks at Dream’s leg. “Do you actually have a favorite?”

“I don’t know enough about constellations to have a favorite.”

“Well,” George grins, “Good thing I have a few months to teach you.”

A few months as in two; the day after high school graduation, both Dream and George packed their bags, borrowed George’s dad’s minivan, and set off. Five states and eleven days later, here they are.

Oklahoma stretches flat in all directions the eye can see. The majority of their drive through the state has been through waist high grass, sparse trees. Acres of farmland and cow pastures. A speckling of small towns. George pointed out a cliché red barn as they whizzed past.

Now, the tall grass waves in the nighttime breeze and whispers aimless things to the earth. George started their fire about an hour ago, scavenging twigs and sticks to add to their stash of firewood. Smoke spirals to the sky in dizzying circles.

“George.”

“Hm?”

“Tell me a story.”

Sparks pop, flames crackle. Swinging his legs on the bumper, his toes stay warm. The noises blur into a steady stream of white, blurring into the background of his mind.

Weight shifts next to Dream as George moves. From across the fire, George’s eyes are nearly black. They reflect the flames like slick obsidian.

He asks, “A good one or a bad one?”

“Any one.”

A slow inhale, low exhale, George props his chin up on his knee. He clears his throat and speaks.

“My mum used to tell me this story about two mice and a fox. The two mice have a wheel of cheese that they both want, but neither of them want to split it. So they ask the fox for help, and the fox splits the cheese unevenly. He offers the first mouse the small piece and the second mouse the big piece. The first mouse thinks it’s unfair, so he asks the fox to re-split the cheese.”

“I don’t think two mice could eat an entire wheel of cheese even if they tried,” Dream mutters. George’s laugh is clear as a bell. Dream’s chest warms from the inside out.

“That’s not the point of the story. Anyway, the fox keeps the smaller piece for himself and splits the bigger one again, but he still splits it unevenly. The mice ask him to split it again and again, and each time the fox takes the smaller piece. Until the two mice are left with a crumb, and the fox has the entire wheel of cheese to himself.”

The fire slowly begins to dim, turning from yellow-gold leaping flames to reddish-orange embers in the night. Dream stares at the embers until they imprint on his vision.

“So the moral of the story is never ask a fox for help?”

“The moral is to be happy with what you get,” George answers. “If the mice had been happy to split the cheese unevenly, they both would have ended up with more. Instead, they lost all of it because they were prideful.”

There's silence for a moment, and George says, "If you and I were mice, I would give you the bigger piece."

Dream raises an eyebrow skeptically. "I would take the smaller piece anyway. I don't like cheese."

"Maybe we would just split it evenly," George muses.

"Who wants cheese anyway? Make it a birthday cake."

George snorts. "Chocolate?"

"With cream cheese frosting."

"And sprinkles."

"Those fake frosting flowers."

"With plastic forks."

"Paper plates, too."

George grins; Dream realizes he is too.

George cracks a yawn, crosses over to the back of the van. He sits down next to Dream and tugs on the hem of his sweatpants. This close, Dream could easily reach out and touch him. A strip of pale skin, by the stretched out neck of his shirt. The rounded bone of his ankle. The divot in his temple, right by a soft curl of hair. Loose, delicate joints in his fingers.

"You should go to sleep," Dream says. George shakes his head droopily.

"I'm not that tired."

Dream huffs, clambers onto the mattress in the back. "I'm going to sleep then."

He tugs the blanket they have up to his chin and stares up at the glow-in-the-dark stars. Their swirling, greenish patterns shine down on him. A dip in the mattress next to him signals that George has laid down.

Outside, a cricket chirps a solemn song to the evening. Dream turns to look at George. George's eyes are closed, and Dream looks at the shadow on his cheekbone and the glow of stars, and rolls to face the other side of the van.

If I had a wheel of cheese, I would give you all of it.

It takes a long time for him to fall asleep.

"I don't particularly care whether we actually stop in every state."

"Mm."

"Who gives a damn about Nebraska, right?"

“Mm.”

“And South Dakota is full of Nazis. Right? Or maybe it’s North Dakota, I’m not sure.”

“Mm.”

“It might be Idaho. I’ll look it up when we get cell service next. Anyway. Do you mind? I think we can skip the Dakotas.”

“Mm.”

He pauses, takes his feet off the dashboard. “Dream? Are you alright?”

Dream, car on cruise control, hands barely on the wheel, looks over at him. Dappled sunlight peeks through and drapes over George’s thigh. His hair is getting long. It droops over his forehead in lazy curls. He’s wearing the pink Elvis Presley shirt, an impulsive buy from the Graceland Mansion in Tennessee. It’s wrinkled and stretched out, falling loose over his shoulders.

“I’m good,” he says instead. “Lost in thought.”

“Any thoughts worth sharing?”

Dream’s fingers twitch on the steering wheel. In the sunlight, George’s eyes are nearly honey colored.

“I don’t mind skipping the Dakotas,” he says, and George brightens. “I thought you wanted pictures of all the state signs, though.”

An expansive shrug. “I can go without the boring ones.”

“All the square states.”

“Yeah,” George agrees. “Fuck squares.”

“We should visit the Four Corners still.”

“Four states for the price of one.”

“Exactly.”

So they visit the Four Corners.

“This is it?” Dream says. “This is pathetic.”

George goes over to a flat stone circle, a cross carved into it, and places his foot over the center. “Look. I’m in four states.”

“Congrats,” Dream says dryly.

It’s a letdown. There’s a small visitor’s center to the left, an American flag dangling in the still air. A spattering of Native American vendors line up to one side. George wanders off to look through what they’re selling.

He comes back a few minutes later with a paper plate with a fried circle of dough on it, dusted with powdered sugar and soaked through with honey. *It’s fry bread*, he explains, a traditional Navajo food. Dream retreats to the van to eat it, and George pops the trunk so they can sit in the back.

The fry bread is puffy, still piping hot, sticky and sugary sweet. George plonks down next to Dream and tears off a piece.

“I figured there would be way more people here.”

Dream nods. “Me too.”

“Guess it’s not really that big of a tourist attraction.”

A gentle breeze blows through, barely tamping down on the heat. Dream tries another piece of the fry bread and sucks off the honey dripping down his fingers.

“We can skip all four of these now,” Dream says. “We’re done with Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and Wyoming.”

“I still want to go to the Grand Canyon though,” George says. “And Yosemite.”

“Yosemite is in California.”

George frowns, a divot between his brows. “Is that not the supervolcano?”

Dream tears off another piece of bread to stop himself from smiling. “That’s Yellowstone. You’re such an idiot.”

George nods agreeably. “Being an idiot is a full time profession.”

“Good thing you’re good at it.”

“So,” George prompts, “We’ll go to Yellowstone?”

“It would be easier to go once we’re by Montana,” Dream says. He traces a line in the air, as if George can see the path his mind is going. “That way we drive less.”

George nods. “After we go up and around, right?”

Dream lets his hand drop and agrees with him. They still have two months left, nearly; both their colleges start in September. Dream is moving up to Connecticut; George is moving to California. They’ll both be leaving Florida behind.

They spend a few more minutes discussing where to go next—the sky is purpling at the edges, night creeping in, and it’ll be best for them to make it to their next rest point before continuing. Dream will take the last stretch of driving.

George nods. “Sounds good. Wait, you have honey on your cheek. One moment—”

He presses his index finger to Dream’s cheek, swipes the honey off, and sticks his finger in his mouth. Every brain cell Dream has fries in the same second. Electricity crackles from the spot on his cheek George touched, ripples down his spine and into his fingers.

George laughs, licks the honey off, smacks his lips. Dream feels his face go red, spreading from that singular point.

“Thanks,” Dream says, impressed with the evenness of his voice.

“Tastes sweet,” George says, voice thick from the honey, and Dream’s heart nearly stops. “Nice.”

“Nice,” Dream echoes, heart beating a frantic pace. *Nice. Nice. Okay.*

George hops off the bumper and stretches, face scrunching up. His shirt follows suit. Dream’s heart leaps into his throat and he forcibly diverts his gaze. He reminds himself that George is his best friend, and that George is stubbornly not interested. A drop of honey and some words will do nothing to change that.

“I’m going to use the bathroom in the visitor’s center,” George says. “Do you want anything?”

The scraps of Dream’s sanity pull together. “What, like a T-shirt that says *I went to the Four Corners*?”

“Of course,” George says sarcastically. “I’ll pick one up just for you.”

He leaves, and Dream polishes off the rest of the fry bread. He presses a tentative hand to his cheek, feels the faint stickiness left over. His mind replays that moment in perfect recall, seeing George’s lips wrap around his finger, brushing against his cheek, and he presses his palms to his eyes, willing his mind to quiet down.

George comes back two minutes later. Dream composes himself, only to immediately lose that composure when George marches back out, wearing a hideous khaki bucket hat stuffed onto his head that proudly claims *I went to the Four Corners!*

“You wasted your spending money on that?”

“How else would I have remembered that I was here?” George flips down the sun visor to peer at himself in the mirror. His fingers twist the bucket hat to better see the logo. “I think it looks beautiful.”

“I think it should be burned.”

“That’s a minority opinion.”

Dream reaches over and pulls the brim of the hat down, so it covers George’s eyes. “It’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I don’t know, you come in pretty close second.”

“Ha ha,” Dream says, “I think you’ve mistaken me for Sarnap.”

“I would never,” George says, “I’m the best at telling you two apart.” He pushes the hat up enough for him to see and buckles his seatbelt. He kicks his feet up on the dashboard and looks to Dream. “Gonna drive?”

Dream tugs on his seatbelt, a touch too forcefully, and refuses to let his eyes stray from the center of the road. He can still feel the honey on his cheek.

At the next mountain overpass, George takes the wheel without a word of complaint. Dream pops an Ambien and promptly conks out. His dreams are incomprehensible, tangles of thoughts and emotions, and he remembers none of them when he wakes up.

He yawns, stretches lazily, scrubs a hand over his face. Outside stretches a valley of red sand, dusty shrubs, a scarce tumbleweed drifting. The sun, which was low in the sky when he fell asleep, has peaked and subsequently fallen. It's going to be difficult for him to fall asleep that night.

"George?"

"Here," George calls; he's popped the trunk and is lying down in the back. "I've been waiting for you to wake up for so long. We're in New Mexico."

Dream peels himself off the passenger seat and rounds the van. A billboard perched on the side of the road says *Welcome to New Mexico! The Land of Enchantment* in red-orange font. George grins, tips his ridiculous bucket hat back, and gives Dream the film camera.

"Take a picture," he instructs, and jogs over to the sign. He gives a thumbs up; Dream clicks, face apathetic, and gives a thumbs up in return.

"Take one with me," George pleads. "It's the land of enchantment. For the scrapbook."

By rote, Dream says, "We are not making a scrapbook."

The devil's grin, on George's face. "Of course not."

Dream sighs, hopelessly tempted, and walks over to the state sign. "Fine."

George turns the camera around, grins, and the shutter clicks right as Dream turns to look at him.

"Another one?"

"It's probably good," Dream says.

George shrugs. "If you say so."

He passes the camera back to Dream, who gives it an experimental shake. The roll of film inside clatters slightly, rattling against the sides. He wonders what all the pictures look like in there, what he'll see when they go get them developed.

"We only have five pictures left," he says, tucking it into the mesh siding of his duffel bag.

George nods sagely. "We can grab another one soon."

He yawns, and abruptly, Dream notices how fatigued and limp he's looking. "Do you want me to drive?"

George yawns again, gives himself a little shake. "I'm good to keep going. You looked really tired."

"I'm going to drive," Dream says, and slides into the driver's seat before he hears a word of complaint from George. "Take a nap."

"I'm fine—"

"George."

George looks at him and relents. "If you're sure," he starts, and Dream interrupts.

"I am."

George looks prepared to argue, but instead grabs his pillow and blanket from the back. He leans the car seat back just enough to lie down. Dream turns the key in the ignition, hears the faint purr of the engine as it starts, continues driving well into New Mexico. They'll make it to their planned motel in two hours if everything goes well.

George's breathing evens out, slowly but surely, and it seems like no time has passed before he's completely asleep. His collar is stretched out, falling over his shoulder, revealing a small patch of skin. Dream wills his breathing to stay steady and tamps down on that wistful longing blossoming in his chest.

Longing is useless; nothing Dream has ever wanted has come to him.

George twitches from his sleep right as Dream exits the highway towards a sleepy roadside town. A motel flashes a *vacancy* sign, purple and pink neon against the nearly black sky.

He mumbles some sleepy, vague nonsense and stretches out. His fingers and toes tremble. Dream pulls to a stop in a parking lot and waits for George to wake up fully.

George tugs his duffel bag up to their door and promptly crashes on one of the beds, shoes and sweatshirt still on. He looks so exhausted that Dream's brain aches at the thought of having to wake him.

"George?" he asks quietly. "George, can I take off your shoes?"

"Mhm," George mumbles. "I'm tired."

"I know you are," Dream says patiently. He unties George's shoes, places them to the side, where he won't trip over them in the dead of night.

Next: "Can I take off your sweatshirt?"

George sleepily nods again, and Dream tugs at the hem of it, as gently as he knows how, lifts it over George's head. It pulls up the shirt underneath, riding up to the base of George's ribcage, a swath of smooth skin. He drags his gaze away, pulls the shirt down, ignores the warmth George's body leaves against his own.

"Go get under the covers," Dream says, not unkindly. George mutters something disparaging under his breath, but does as Dream says. Dream waits until George clambers under them, and, foolishly feeling like a mother tucking her unruly kids to bed, tucks the comforter around George.

"Thank you," George murmurs. Fingers curl loosely around Dream's own. "You're amazing."

"Okay," he says. The word pales in comparison to everything George has given him. "Now go to sleep."

George hums, a last wisp of awareness, and drifts off.

Dream brushes his teeth, changes into pajamas, turns off the lights, crawls into bed, stares at the ceiling for what feels like hours. George's words stay stuck in his mind, sweeter than milk and honey.

Morning light spills over Dream in wavy lines and alerts him to the proceedings of the day. The shower runs smoothly in the background, and George's side is seemingly long deserted. Dream presses a hand to the rumpled sheets and finds them cold to the touch.

The outside looks different in the daylight. The Denny's, illuminated fluorescent at night, is cheery red and yellow in the day. The highway's white street lamps are replaced with the glowing sun. The world feels alive and moving in a way that doesn't exist at night.

There's nothing to do while George is in the bathroom except remain in bed, and so Dream does. From his vantage point he can see their van in the parking lot, parked just so crookedly amongst the other cars. It was painfully late when they arrived; his parking skills tell the story.

The shower cuts off and the door opens, steam spilling out into the already warm room. George emerges, pink and scrubbed clean. He's in a fresh shirt and a clean pair of joggers. He looks down at the shoes by the door and frowns.

"Did you take off my shoes last night?"

"Yeah," Dream says, voice even. "You were tired."

"I was exhausted," George agrees. "Thank you, I would've hated to wake up uncomfortable."

"I know."

George smiles sheepishly. "Sorry for being so useless last night."

"It's okay," Dream says. The tips of his ears start going red. He prays that George doesn't notice. "I don't mind."

George flashes him a small, content smile. Dream's heart clenches in his chest. He feels like he's teetering on the edge of an awful, tremendous, beautiful fall. There's only one way to go but down.

He's right.

It only gets worse.

His every thought is plagued by George. He sees a gas station, knows what type of gum George would choose, what cold drink he would jump at the chance to have. He sees an interesting book, magazine, movie, thinks *George would like this*. He sees the sky and thinks *that is George's eyes*. He sees George himself and thinks *I want you here, by my side, I want you more than you can possibly know*.

He thinks about the mole below George's jaw by his earlobe and imagines pressing his lips to it. He looks at the way George's hair falls in looping curls over his forehead and imagines running his hands through it. He sees the slim joints in George's fingers and imagines holding them close. He thinks about the sprawl of freckles up and down George's arms and imagines kissing each one, slowly, up and down his body. He looks at George's loose, uncaring smile and imagines it against his own.

It's to the point where Dream plots out their driving for the day based on what he thinks George

would enjoy the most. Purposely slows down the car when there's a tumbleweed. Or a jackrabbit. Or a funny shaped cloud. When George is asleep, Dream avoids every pothole like each is a personal offense to him. Brakes as slowly as possible to avoid waking him up.

If George notices, he doesn't say a word.

It feels like victory and defeat, all in one.

Two hours past the state border of Colorado, George gapes out the window and says, "Is that snow?"

Dream checks to make sure no one is behind him and slows to a snail's pace. George presses his palms against the window like a kid in a candy store, eyes wide. Dream, who has never lived in a place that snows, is equally astonished. He can't stop himself from peering out the window at the wide expanse of white passing by.

There's a stop in the road up ahead, and Dream pulls over the second there's enough available space to do so. His usual disinterest in proceedings is so apparent compared to George's wide-eyed engagement.

"How is there still snow on the mountains?" George says wondrously. "It's June."

"I guess it never melts," Dream says.

"I guess," George echoes. "This is so weird."

Dream digs the toe of his boot into the snow and steps back to see the print. The snow crunches under his weight. He takes another step out, sees the grass and dirt plastered underneath.

He says, "I've never seen this much snow."

It's pathetic, because this is barely any snow. But the heavy winter rains they get in Florida are barely anything either.

Dream reaches down and presses a hand into the snow. It's more ice than powder, and the cold spreads slowly through his fingers.

"I was going to make a snowball," George says. "But it would have been a massive ice cube, and I don't want to drive you to the hospital just yet."

It startles a laugh out of Dream. "I would've sensed you throwing it."

George shakes his head. "I would have caught you by surprise."

"I'd like to see you try," Dream says, half-seriously.

"Don't tempt me," says George. "One day you won't see it coming."

Dream takes his hand away. The cold seeps into his fingers, turning his skin pink.

George gestures. "Come on, it's almost three. We'll get to the motel at midnight if we stay much longer."

The snow crunches under Dream's feet as he steps back to the van. He almost wants to stay out longer, to see more, but George's right.

It takes them thirty minutes to peak the mountain and drive back down, and in that time, the roadside is still speckled with white. They're halfway through June, it's averaging fifty degrees outside, and somehow the snowfall from winter hasn't melted.

Traffic congeals on the freeway right as they approach the edge of Colorado Springs, traffic congeals on the freeway until they're sitting bumper to bumper. The sun set nearly thirty minutes ago, but the last bits of the sunset are still bleaching the night sky. Cars and trucks honk in shades of red and white headlights. George lets out a slow breath and taps his fingers against the window in an unsteady beat.

They arrive at the motel thirty minutes later. George lets him claim first shower and raids the vending machine on the ground floor while Dream does. He comes out of the bathroom to a mess of chips and candy and soda bottles.

"Finally," George says, and snatches his towel off the bedspread. "You were taking so long, I thought you'd drowned."

Dream sprawls across the bedspread in all its glorious comfort. The shower cuts on in the background as Dream tears open the first bag of chips he comes across. Neon lights filter through the motel curtains.

He considers texting Sapnap, but dismisses the idea. He'll probably be asleep at this point; he's two hours behind them, and if it's late for Dream and George, it's surely much later for Sapnap.

George exits the bathroom much quicker than Dream had, and sprawls across the bed in a style remarkably similar to Dream. He stares at the ceiling for a moment before speaking.

"Should we sleep?"

"I'm not tired yet," Dream says. "I don't think I'll be able to."

The white static buzzes. The ceiling fan whirs. Dream allows himself to sink into the mattress, but his mind stays firmly awake.

"Dream," George says, in that awfully attractive tone, and Dream knows he's about to agree with whatever George says. "Hear me out."

Dream sighs, long suffering. "What?"

"We should go swimming."

Dream turns his head to look at him. "Are you kidding?"

"It'll be fun," George says.

The motel boasts a simple lap pool, around the back and fenced off. It closes after ten, and it's almost eleven thirty.

"It's closed."

George reaches out and pokes Dream's thigh. "We can hop the fence."

He tries, "We'll have to shower again."

"I'll let you go first and use all the hot water."

“The pool will be cold.”

George grins, the devil’s smile, and Dream curses it to hell and back. “I’ll keep you warm.”

Dream curses this magnetic attraction, gravitating him towards George. He curses whichever cruel god made hormones this painful to bear. He curses the fact that he’ll never be able to say no to George when he looks like this.

“Fine,” Dream says, reluctantly, “Only for an hour.”

George’s smile is Cheshire Cat-like. He hushes Dream as they clamber over the chain-link fence. It makes no difference, because neither of them are making any noise. The pavement is chilly beneath Dream’s bare feet, soaking the warmth from his body.

The swimming pool is deserted, but not covered. Water laps gently at the tiles. Dream dips his toes into the water, before settling on the edge. He rucks his sweatpants up, but water still seeps into the hems. George strips down to his boxers and steps into the shallow end.

Goosebumps prickles over George’s body. He shivers. “It’s freezing.”

“This was your idea.”

“I know,” he mutters, and takes another step. He looks over to Dream and curls his fingers.

“I’m not going in,” Dream says.

“Okay.”

A moment, and then: “Not even in the shallow end?”

George’s up to his chin, and raises his hands to the surface. The water distorts them, swirling shapes and spirals.

“If you don’t want to, it’s fine.”

Dream’s stomach feels tight and hot. Maybe it is—

“Worth a shot,” Dream says.

The water is freezing, but by the time he’s up to his knees, it’s tolerable. George ducks his head under, comes up shaking water like a duck. He treads water steadily, and swims over to Dream in quick, efficient strokes. Dream watches his fluid movements with trepidation.

“I don’t know how to swim,” Dream admits.

“Oh.” George blinks.

Dream knows it’s odd. For someone who’s grown up in Florida, he surely should know how to swim. But there’s something about the pounding crescendo of the waves on the shore and the lapping water he could hear from his bedroom window during heavy storms, and he’s never had the desire to learn.

“It’s not hard.”

Dream nods.

"I could teach you," he says.

The greenish glow reflects off his face, illuminating his cheekbones. His hair is dark, curled from the water. He offers a hand, and begrudgingly, Dream takes it.

"Don't let me drown," Dream says, only half-joking.

"Swimming is really quite easy," George says. "We can start with treading water, that's an easy place."

Dream doesn't know, but he trusts George anyway. George swims towards the deep end, staying afloat easily, and then comes back to get Dream from the shallow end.

"It's alright, I've got you," George soothes, and braces Dream's hands firmly on his shoulders. "I'll keep you floating as we go into the deep end."

"Mhm," Dream says, slightly strangled.

"Just copy my leg movements. Hey, hey. Hold onto my shoulders, okay?"

"Okay," Dream breathes, and tries to mimic the strong, steady way George's legs are moving as best he can. George keeps two warm hands on top of him, inadvertently pulling him closer, and he actually has the hang of this now, floating more on his own rather than clutching to George.

"I'm going to let go now," George says gently, "Keep your hands moving like mine."

He pushes away, and for a brief, fluttering moment Dream's staying up on his own, the rhythm steady and even.

"You're doing it!"

Dream looks up to see George, delicate pride floating behind his eyes, and the rhythm falters.

He splutters, begins to sink, feels the terrifying sensation of sinking below the surface. He can't keep himself afloat, his limbs are heavy as lead, there's no air for a breath.

In a flash George is by his side again. He loops his arms around George's neck and clings tight as George paddles to the edge.

"Are you okay?"

Dream coughs, heaves a shuddering breath, braces arms on the pool ladder.

A tad more concerned: "Are you okay, Dream?"

"I'm never swimming again," he coughs. "Why would anyone ever want to do that?"

George's hands, imperceptibly, curl tighter around his waist. One foot, braced against the pool wall. One hand, gripping the edge.

He's suddenly keenly aware of how hot George is, the way he's leeching body warmth from him, the closeness of their bodies and the way Dream's chest rises and falls in tandem with him. He's so close, close enough that Dream can see the water droplets clinging to his eyelashes, the pool lights reflecting in his eyes.

"It takes practice," George says. "Are you sure you're okay?"

He's still so close.

"I'm breathing," Dream says, and pushes himself out of the pool. "So yes, I'm okay."

"Good," George breathes, reassurance coloring his voice. "I'm glad."

Dream's heart is beating unreasonably quick. Heat spreads from the loose touch George has against his legs. George seems to notice at the same time and retracts his hands.

"Um," George says, red, "Sorry for grabbing you like that. I just wanted to make sure you were safe."

"It's fine," Dream mutters. "I would have told you if it wasn't."

"Okay," George says. There's a flash of relief. He's still shoulder deep in water, holding onto the ledge. Dream pulls his legs out and sits cross legged. George moved over slightly so he's directly in front of him.

Goosebumps break out from the cold night air. A shiver runs down his back, and George says, "Want to go back in?"

Dream nods, and offers George a hand. Out of the water, George gives himself a shake that is remarkably similar to a dog drying itself off and squeezes water from his hair. Dream briefly considers putting his clothes back on, but they would get soaked regardless.

They leave a trail of wet footprints down the hallway and up the stairs. When they duck into the room, George gestures to the shower. Dream takes his second shower in two hours and lets the water work the last of the cold from his body. The bubbles rinse the chlorine off his skin, and erases the memory of George's touch against him. Dream's fingertips are pruny by the time he turns the shower off. He breathes in the thick, soupy steam into his lungs and imagines it cleaning himself from the inside out. Imagines that the water and bubbles have rinsed both the chlorine and the memory of George's touch from his skin.

They haven't.

The second Dream leaves the bathroom, George asks, "Did you leave me any hot water?"

His voice is teasing. Dream nods, *yes*, and George promptly disappears. The bathroom door clicks, and the shower cuts on.

Dream tucks his knees up to his chest and rests his chin on top of them. His heart beats ridiculously fast in his chest, faster than he can count.

In the time it takes for George to emerge from the shower, brush his teeth, towel off his hair, and climb into the bed, Dream's thoughts have taken him nowhere.

Into the darkness, George whispers, "Are you awake?"

"I'm up," Dream says. His voice feels too loud for the room. He hears George move around, but keeps his eyes on the curtains.

"Sorry I'm such a bad teacher," George says, after a moment. "I'll teach you again sometime."

"You're a good teacher. I'm a bad learner."

"You were doing fine until I distracted you," argues George.

The words slip out before Dream holds them back: “I’m always distracted by you.”

He can hear George’s smile in his words. “Am I that annoying?”

“You have no idea,” Dream mutters. Thanks whatever god is listening that George is incredibly oblivious. “You’re incredibly annoying.”

“You like it,” George says.

He sounds self satisfied, slightly cocky. It’s the most attractive tone on him. Briefly, Dream thinks that he wants to kiss him.

Really kiss him. Kiss him until he goes blind. Kiss him until Dream can see every single color not yet known to man. Kiss him until the only thing that exists in the world is the two of them. Kiss him until the world is repainted in shades of Dream and George. Kiss him until they are one.

For a moment, Dream entertains the fantasy. Lets himself truly sink into it. What George would look like, dazed and happy. The way his fingers might feel tangled in Dream’s hair. How Dream would feel, heart racing, skin heated.

Just as quickly as it arrives, it disappears, fades like morning mist burnt away by the sun. Because it’s nothing more than a fantasy, and there’s no reason George would ever feel the same, not when he has the entire world in front of him.

Because this isn’t Dream’s story. This is George’s story, and Dream will always be the side character. The side character never gets what they want.

Dream thinks and thinks and thinks until sleep claims him, and then he doesn’t think any longer.

One night finds them sitting on the bumper, night falling. Crickets are soon beginning to sing their melodies. Dream looks to the sky and thinks about all the knowledge of constellations that he’s gathered from George. The longer Dream stares, the more he draws invisible patterns in his mind, constellations that certainly don’t exist.

“If you really think about it, we’re looking down,” he says, after a long moment. “Gravity is the only thing keeping us from falling.”

For a moment, he can picture himself dangling off the side of the earth, tethered there with invisible strings of gravity. The stars, floating below him in a massive chasm of space. George, next to him, glowing brighter than the sun.

“That’s scary,” George says. “Imagine if you just fell down, and there’s nothing there to catch you, so you just keep falling and falling—”

Dream shudders involuntarily. “Let’s not imagine that.”

“Good idea,” George agrees.

Dream exhales a long, slow breath. Looks down— up— at the stars, and says, “When I was a kid, I wanted to be an astronaut.” George says nothing, so he continues, “It seemed like with enough time and practice I would be able to escape to the moon whenever I wanted.”

“I never really had a dream job,” George says absentmindedly. “I just wanted to do what I loved, whatever that was.”

A blinking light streaks across the sky, a satellite in orbit. It follows a clean, precise arc.

“I sometimes wonder where I would be if life had gone differently,” Dream says. The satellite crosses the horizon and disappears. “If things happened differently, or if they didn’t happen at all. I wonder what would have happened to me.”

George hums. “Like multiple universes. Multiple timelines.”

Dream nods.

“I like to think that no matter the timeline, I end up here,” says George. “I think that some things are going to transcend universes no matter what.”

“I like this timeline,” Dream says, and the words burn in his mouth. “I’d like to stay in this one.”

“Me too,” says George softly. “I wouldn’t want anything to change.”

Overhead, the stars track silver paths across the sky. They really are looking down into the endless abyss of the universe.

I want to hold you close every night, he thinks, I want you by my side every day.

The Grand Canyon seems impossibly wider and deeper than Dream could have imagined.

It stretches so far that the other side seems like a movie backdrop. Heat waves rise off the ground and distort it. Layers of eroded rock crawl down the sides, shifting from brown to red to orange, dusty green shrubs clinging to the cliffs. The river thunders below, barely audible.

Dream looks over the edge and gets a dizzying sweep of vertigo so terrifying that he has to take a few steps back. The fence seems absurdly low. There are kids and teenagers and adults nearly bent in half, looking over the edge.

His heartbeat pounds in his ears.

It would be so easy to simply go over the edge. To fall.

“Whoa,” George says, “I never expected it would look like this. This is incredible . ”

“Mhm.”

George goes on his tiptoes, sending a new wave of butterflies panicking through Dream’s lungs. A rushing sound floods his ears. The river churns below, always carving deeper and deeper.

“George,” Dream says, too close to desperate for his liking, “Can you take a step back?”

George looks back at him, likely remembering Dream’s fear of heights, and obligingly steps back. He takes two more steps and joins Dream safely away. Even from this distance, the astounding depth of the Grand Canyon is still obvious.

"I'm not going to fall," says George. "I'm very careful."

"I know," says Dream, "Let's not test that theory."

"Not planning on it."

The ground is dizzyingly far away. Dream presses a hand to the rock next to him to remind himself that he's on flat ground. A kid, shrieking, runs towards the edge and is scooped up by an overbearing parent. Dream takes another step back, until he can't see the sharp cutoff anymore, and until the edge looks like another ordinary path.

Overhead, a massive condor sweeps through the sky. He circles high overhead, magnificent wingspan, then comes to a rest in a tree branch. There's an excited shout from a tourist, and then another, and then everyone's abruptly distracted by the sight.

"Visitor's Center?" asks Dream.

"Whatever you want," George says.

Dream tries to find it in himself to be frustrated at that easy acquiescence, but only finds overwhelming relief that they're back on flat ground.

An hour later finds them seated on a bench, by one of the endless hiking trails around the rim. A bushy tree overhead grants them dappled shade. The excited calls about the condor sighting have long dissipated, leaving only the various stray hikers to come across them.

"Why is this so difficult?" George mutters, chewing on the end of his pencil. "What type of weather starts with an *M* and has seven letters?"

"Monsoon," Dream says.

George scowls down at his Junior Ranger booklet. "This is bullshit."

At the Visitor's Center, George had finally managed to coax Dream into getting an activity booklet from the National Park ranger on site. Pencils and paper in hand, they wandered down one of the hiking trails until they found a patch of shade to rest in.

"It was *your* idea," Dream says.

"Give me your answers," George pleads. "I'm almost done with the crossword puzzle, come on."

Dream raises an eyebrow and pulls his booklet closer to his chest. "Absolutely not. You're not cheating off me."

"It's not cheating if I'm asking politely."

"That's not asking, that's demanding."

"Dream," George says, stretching the syllables out like taffy, twining Dream around his little finger, "Dream, come on. It would make me *so* happy."

Dream, heart turning giddy little flips in his chest, passes his booklet over. "You owe me."

"Anything," George promises.

Dream swallows, chest hot and tight, and thinks that he would do anything to make George happy,

and pushes that thought down to where no one can see it.

George muses, “How did you finish this so fast? Your memory must be amazing.”

“Natural talent,” Dream says.

George scribbles in the last word on the puzzle and closes his booklet with a satisfied grin. “I’m done. *Finally.*”

“Took you long enough,” Dream mutters.

George passes Dream’s booklet back to him. “Thank you.”

The tips of Dream’s ears redden. “No problem.”

George looks at him and pokes his cheek with a finger. “You’re blushing.”

“It’s hot,” Dream says.

“It’s cute,” George says. Dream’s heart skips twenty beats consecutively. “Let’s get going, come on.”

When they turn their booklets in at the front desk, Dream mentally prepares himself to be forced to hold up his hand and repeat after the ranger like he’s a child. Fortunately, the ranger sees that they’re both over eighteen and gives them the opportunity to hand in their booklets and get a badge without ceremony. Dream turns the plastic pin over in his hand; it’s dumb, and cheap, and ridiculously childish.

George gestures. “Can I?”

Dream’s throat clicks as he swallows, and he nods. George steps close— very close— with the pin in his hand. Slides the needle under Dream’s shirt, pinches the fabric, secures the badge to his shirt. Almost unconsciously, his hands move to Dream’s collar, smoothes his shirt, smoothes his hands down Dream’s chest.

The contact doesn’t last for long, barely a moment, leaving only the memory of George’s touch against him.

“Congrats,” George says. “You’re a Junior Ranger.”

Dream flicks the badge pinned to George’s chest. It makes a little *ping* sound. George grins.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” says George, and turns to go. “Wait for me?”

Dream says, “I will.”

The visitor’s center boasts a walk-through of all the various flora and fauna found throughout the canyon. Dream busies himself with it and reads each plaque slowly. He’s halfway through the second loop around when George finds him again.

“Here,” George says, and pushes a stuffed animal into Dream’s hands. “Repayment.”

“Repayment,” says Dream.

He looks down at it; it’s a stuffed mountain lion, patchy and dusty tan. Still has a price tag on it, clipped through the ear. It looks like a placating gift that an exhausted parent might give their

overexcited toddler to get them to shut up.

“Not entirely repayment,” George amends. “Just because I felt like it.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

The mountain lion goes on the dashboard of their van.

Dream feels like crying every time he looks at it.

They skip dinner in favor of breaking open their snack box once again. Stuck in bumper to bumper traffic just east of California, there’s no way they’ll make it to their planned motel before midnight. Pulling over for dinner is only going to delay that. For a while, George makes a game of tossing chocolate covered raisins into his mouth. Dream raises a skeptical eyebrow: *you’re going to clean those up.*

George says falsely, *of course I will*, and the next chocolate covered raisin plonks off his forehead and rolls somewhere below the passenger seat.

The motel they end up pulling into only has a king size bed available, but Dream and George take one look at each other and silently agree that it’s worth it. Dream’s exhaustion makes him feel droopy and half melted, dragging his feet down the hallway. He runs a five minute shower, nearly too tired to enjoy the hot water, and claims the right side of the bed. George moves around in the bathroom, doing his best to be quiet.

An interminable amount of time later, he comes out, hair damp. There’s a dip in the mattress as George settles next to him. He reaches out a foot and touches Dream’s foot, who flinches away from how cold George’s feet are. The comforter rustles, shifts, and stills. Dream waits until he’s nearly a thousand percent sure that George is fast asleep.

Into the dark, Dream whispers, “George?”

There’s no response.

Dream says, “I really think this trip has changed me.”

He doesn’t say anything for a while. Right as his heart clenches, too painful and awful to bear, Dream whispers, “I really like you. I think I love you.”

The darkness swallows his words.

When they wake up the next morning, George gives no sign of having heard.

Dream, for his own sanity, pretends he said nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

i was planning to post this as a multichaptered fic on its own, but the first half of it fit

so well with the unrequited love prompt that i just posted it like this. if anyone would be interested in a part 2 (where things are... less unrequited) then let me know <3

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

California deserts, meteor showers, two shot glasses, the pain of being next to someone you love and believing that they will never love you in the same way. Dream does his best to remind himself that there is light, even in the darkest places.

Chapter Notes

sorry this took so long, but here is the long awaited part two!! also side note, please go check out [this art](#) by my good friend on [tumblr!](#) it's very cool and she's a phenomenal artist <3 hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun has just begun its nightly descent when they reach the outskirts of the California state border. Dream looks at the fluorescent lights of a gas station as they pass and George jerks his shoulder.

“Gas station?”

Dream considers it and gives a shrug. An ice cold drink would be nice. The cooler is fast losing cold, though they're trying their best.

“Do you want anything?” Dream says, digging through his duffel bag for a crumpled pile of bills. “I’m getting snacks.”

“If they have mint gum, yeah.” George says, and adds, “But not spearmint. I hate spearmint. Just the normal blue mint gum.”

Dream taps a two fingered salute to him and heads inside. He snatches two packs of ‘normal blue mint gum’ for George and heads to the back aisles to pick out a few snacks for himself. Once he’s done, the salesman, old and balding, rings him up. Dream pushes his luck and asks for a bottle of vodka, perched high behind the counter. He doesn’t get carded for that, thankfully, and makes it back to the car holding his victory aloft.

George finishes refilling the tank, pays for it, and slams the fuel door closed. He hops back into the passenger seat and looks at Dream skeptically.

“Did you steal that?”

“He didn’t card me.”

“You’re not drinking and driving.”

Dream scoffs. “Obviously not. It’s for tonight.”

“You’d get alcohol poisoning if you drank all that.” George settles back into the passenger seat, this time with a novel. “I don’t want to take care of a drunk Dream all night.”

“I’m not going to drink all of it tonight.” Dream retorts, then adds, “If you wanted, you could get drunk with me.”

George curls his lip, makes a disgusted face. “No thank you.”

“Not a drinker?”

“I’m a lightweight,” George says. “I don’t like being drunk.”

Dream accepts it without complaint. He’s fairly certain he’s seen George at a few scattered high school parties, where there was definitely alcohol, but George must not have been drinking then.

“Any particular reason?”

“I don’t like losing control,” says George. “Alcohol makes you lose control.”

Dream considers it. *Hms* thoughtfully. “It lowers your inhibitions, yes.”

“Is that not the same as losing control?”

“Some people are better at holding their liquor than others, yes,” Dream says. “It’s a matter of knowing your limits. I’m tall, I know I can drink more than someone who’s five feet tall and a hundred pounds. But I’m not going to drink as much as a pro football player.”

“I suppose,” George says slowly. “I still don’t trust myself being drunk around other people.”

Dream lets the conversation slide without argument. He turns the key in the ignition, and his attention back to driving. The bottle of alcohol goes in the backseat, ignored by both parties.

George gestures to the book in his lap. Cover tattered, pages worn down from time, he says, “Do you want me to read it out loud?”

Dream raises and drops a shoulder. “If you want.”

It’s a watered down version of *yes*, so George clears his throat and begins reading. It’s a different book from last time (*Of Mice and Men*) and it only takes Dream a few moments to place it.

“A Wrinkle in Time,” says Dream. “Original.”

“It’s relatable,” George says. “Except we’re not traveling to different planets to defeat endless darkness, just going on a road trip.”

“Of course,” Dream says. “How more relatable could it get?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” George says. He turns a page and continues; Dream recognizes the chapter and the scene. He’s read this book before, back when he was a child. George’s voice is smooth and soft, consonants rounded and delicate in his mouth, and Dream finds himself focusing less and less on the words of the book and more on the way they sound in George’s voice.

Dream could fall asleep to this. He could listen to George talk, over and over, painting the sky every color known to man. He could listen to George talk himself hoarse and never once grow tired of it.

The sun is low in the sky, hanging bulbous and fat over the horizon. It shines directly onto them, yellow and vibrant.

They're in the middle of the desert. When Dream rolls the window down, the temperature has barely dropped from the eighties. Even though the moon is peeking up at the horizon, in shades of silver. It seems like they've truly hit summer weather.

"I think we should just stop here for tonight," George says, yawning, "What do you think?"

Dream nods. It's probably best, because both of them are tired to the bone. It's not smart for them to keep driving, even if George did take the wheel after this.

It takes them another fifteen minutes for them to find an appropriate stop to pull over at. Neither of them start a fire, both too conscious of the fact that they're in the middle of one of the driest states well known for its wildfires, and instead just turn on their yellow lanterns instead. It sends light flowing over the walls of the van, and absentmindedly Dream runs his hands over a flyer for Linville Caverns that George plastered up, way back at the beginning of their trip. It's worn down and faded, from being retaped up over and over again.

"Remember when we were talking about parallel universes?"

George's question comes out of nowhere, and Dream pauses for a moment.

"Kind of," he says. "About other versions of ourselves."

"Yeah," George says. "Do you think there's an alternate universe where we're different?"

Dream considers this, and says, "Of course."

"Quick answer."

"There's no way I'm the same in every universe," Dream says. "Maybe in one I'm famous. Maybe in another I'm already dead. Who knows?"

"Famous," George laughs. "Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Why are you asking now?" Dream says. "What about you?"

"I don't know," George says. "I was just wondering."

There's an alternate universe where instead of turning away to sleep, feeling the other person's weight on the mattress across from them, they turn and face each other instead. There's an alternate universe where Dream links hands with George. There's an alternate universe where Dream leans forward and kisses him under their glow in the dark stars, slow and smooth, and there's an alternate universe where George kisses him back eagerly.

Dream sleeps. He reminds himself, *this is not that universe*.

George spreads one of their picnic blankets across the field and gestures for Dream to sit next to him. He convinced Dream to pull over five minutes ago, preaching something about picnics and sunlight and afternoons. It's one of the rare green fields of California that they've found, and

George wouldn't let go of it.

Puffy clouds track across the sky in white trails. The summer day is beautiful.

A ladybug scuttles up Dream's finger, perches there with hedonistic delight. It's startlingly red against his tan skin. Dream watches it crawl with muted interest.

"My mum told me they were good luck," George says. "I never saw them much as a kid."

"I'm sure they're everywhere in California," Dream says. "Especially during the summer."

The ladybug perches on his fingernail for a moment. Dream raises his hand against the sun, sees the veins glow red. In the next instant, the ladybug spreads its wings and disappears.

Dream drops his hand. When it hits the ground, George's hand shifts next to him. George stares at the sky, expression determinedly blank, and cautiously links pinkies with Dream.

Every nerve in Dream's body sings, his world narrows to the electric link between him and George. For a moment he can barely function.

"I'm really enjoying this summer," George says, as if he's not lighting all of Dream aflame.

"Me too," Dream breathes.

He moves his hand just slightly, enough to interlock his ring finger with George's.

"It's fun to go anywhere. Not have anyone tell me what to do."

"There's so much freedom," Dream agrees.

He turns his head to the right, and George's smile makes his heart do cartwheels in his chest. Almost unknowingly, their middle fingers link. The blue sky is second only to George's eyes.

George says, "I wouldn't want to do this with anyone but you."

Slowly they figure out the alignment of knuckles and joints and curves. The gentleness of it is foreign to Dream. But he wouldn't give it up. Not for the sky or moon or flowers, not for the world, not for anything.

Heart in throat: "Me either."

There's nothing between them except a few wildflowers. Vaguely, Dream registers birds chirping vibrantly, calling out to one another. The sun spills down on them.

"Who would have thought this would be us?" George muses. "When I first met you—"

"Oh joy," Dream says. "Tell me your first impressions."

George hums. "You were really intimidating. I was new, and you were good friends with Sapnap, and I wanted to stay with my friend."

"Intimidating," Dream repeats.

"Mm. That popular kid aesthetic. Your impossible attitude."

Dream curls his lip. George squeezes his hand and grins.

“It’s not like you were any better. I don’t think you wore one good looking outfit all of freshman year.”

“Old habits die hard,” he sighs. “I guess I really did look atrocious, huh.”

“You looked good,” Dream says. “You just needed a sense of style.”

George turns to look at him. “Are you calling me pretty, Dream?”

Dream’s heart drops into his stomach. “I’m calling your fashion taste ugly. Don’t get them confused.”

“You don’t have to lie,” George teases. “It’s okay, I think you’re pretty too.”

“Shut up,” Dream says, face hot. “You’re the worst.”

With his free hand, George pokes Dream’s cheek, and Dream turns his face away. He can’t see George’s expression, but apparently George takes the hint because the conversation switches tacks.

“Freshman year feels so long ago,” George says, neatly diverting Dream’s thoughts. “I was so different.”

“Me too,” Dream says.

“I think this is the most fun I’ve had in ages,” George says. “Just you and me.”

“You and me,” Dream echoes.

George’s thumb traces delicate circles around the back of Dream’s hand. The movement sends tingles through Dream’s nerves.

Dream admits, “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

George lolls his head to the side, squeezes Dream’s hand. They fit so perfectly, Dream thinks, thumbs hooked over the other, fingers entwined, lining up with every freckle on the back of George’s hands.

“I think we were made for each other,” George says softly. “Weren’t we?”

Dream’s lungs stop working.

The heat of his body next to him, the tickling of grass. The spacey, hazy blue of the sky. The honey of George’s eyes. A cardinal chirps in the background, the hum of a bumblebee. It’s suddenly too much, too bright, too raw.

He pushes himself up, untangles himself, paces away, digs fingers into forearms. George sits up in confusion.

“Dream?”

Dream doesn’t take any heed of him, doesn’t listen to him. Because George can talk all he likes, of songbirds and stars and soulmates, but Dream cannot. Will not. There’s nothing that can happen, will ever happen between them. Because George doesn’t love him, he never will, and he’ll only ever see Dream as a friend.

And Dream will only ever exist in this half circle of hell, designed solely for him.

“Dream?” George calls, sounding lost. “I didn’t— I don’t know what I did wrong. Please don’t leave.”

“Stop talking,” says Dream.

George falls silent.

The wind whistles an empty reply.

“We’re not made for each other,” Dream says eventually.

“Okay.”

“It will never be *just you and me* .”

“Okay.”

George’s voice trembles, barely so.

Silence.

“I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

Silence.

“Can we just go back to talking?”

Dream turns, and George’s sitting half up, hands braced against the ground. Young, uncertain. Grass flattened beneath him. Behind him, wildflowers flutter in the wind. His voice is fragile, the string between them tenuous.

“We should keep driving,” says Dream.

George’s face crumples and hammers flat, all in the space of a second. He nods, begins packing up their things, closes the trunk with surgical precision. He doesn’t look at Dream as he clambers into the passenger seat.

“I’m going to sleep,” he says. He already has his blanket and pillow.

Dream says nothing.

George clutches his pillow to his head, curls towards the passenger door, tugs the blanket up to his ears, and closes his eyes. Dream has known him nearly four years, and painfully knows him well enough to say that for the next three hours, George does not sleep at all.

Dream stares at the road ahead and thinks of nothing.

Tensions ease slightly that night.

They stop at a McDonalds on the side of the road for a bathroom break and an Oreo McFlurry. Dream tries to focus on the ice cream and comes up with a chalky, tasteless flavor. George comes back out of the bathroom, eyes red rimmed. Takes a seat, bounces his knee under the table. Looks

somehow everywhere and nowhere at once.

“I’m sorry,” he says abruptly.

The linoleum table is suddenly very interesting to Dream. When did he become unable to face these things head on?

Blandly: “I don’t want your apology.”

George falters. “Fuck, Dream, I don’t know what else to say. I know I made you upset. I don’t know what to do to fix it.”

“There’s nothing to be fixed,” Dream says. “Everything’s fine.”

George stares at him for a long moment, discontentment etched into every line. He repeats, “Everything is fine.”

Dream nods.

George opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again, closes it. “You’re impossible.”

“It’s what I’m known for.”

A crack of a smile. “I suppose so.”

The tension bleeds out slowly, coagulated and sticky. It still feels like he’s tip-toeing on eggshells; it still feels like George’s holding himself together at the seams; it still feels like they’ve crossed a line into dangerous territory.

As if he’s testing the waters, George reaches across the table and steals Dream’s ice cream. He takes a bite, scrunches his nose, passes it back; Dream flicks his wrist, says something about a sweet tooth.

Just like that, things go back to normal.

Except not quite.

George fiddles with the disposable camera now. He turns it over and over in his hands. The cartridge inside rattles; Dream has half a mind to ask him to stop.

“We need to buy a new one somewhere,” he says abruptly. “This one only has three pictures left.”

“We’ll stop by a convenience store.”

“Hm.”

Silence.

George starts fidgeting again. The camera rattles. Dream risks a glance over, looks away from the road. George’s legs are angled toward the door. His gaze is distant. The camera turns over and over and over.

Dream sighs. “Spit it out.”

“What?”

“Whatever you’re thinking. Spit it out.”

“I’m not thinking about anything.”

“Whatever is making you anxious, then.”

“Nothing is making me anxious,” George says. Sullen. Drops the camera in the cupholder, crosses his arms. Tense and tight one moment, and in the second moment he’s walled off and closed. “I’m fine.”

Flatly, Dream says, “You’re fine.”

“I’m fine,” repeats George.

Dream flicks him a second look. The words he wants to say are swallowed. George clearly wants him to stop pressing, and so he will.

Dream turns his gaze back to the road and tries to steady his thoughts. As if George can read them, George turns and says, “I’ll figure it out on my own.”

“Okay.”

“It’s personal.”

“Okay,” Dream says.

He grits his teeth and stares at the road ahead and does his best to not pick apart every piece of George’s actions. What could he be worried about; something so deep and wild that he wouldn’t share it with Dream? Something large enough to keep a secret?

He’s not entitled to George’s inner workings. Still, Dream misses their easy communication, the way they could read each other so easily. There’s an invisible barrier now, between them. Dream can’t help but feel like he’s the one who shifted them out of place.

Dream glances at him again. George’s staring out the window. His eyes are glazed, taking no part in the present. Dream turns his attention back to the road, brain circling, trying to think of what has made George so impossibly quiet.

For all his thinking, he comes up with no answers.

Again, the motel that night has only one room with a king bed available. Dream’s eyes are already drooping, and the last thing he wants is to spend the night with George in the same bed, when every piece of him urges to be closer. When he’ll be distracted the entire night, feeling so vividly the presence of George next to him.

Crush isn’t a big enough word for it. *Love* isn’t a big enough word for it.

If Dream were a smarter man, he might say *soulmate*.

But George doesn’t argue about the prospect of sharing a bed, like always, and so Dream doesn’t argue. They take their duffel bags upstairs in silence.

Their showers last barely minutes. Dream claims the side of the bed closest to the window first, and turns his head towards the window. He's been the one driving most of this trip (as much as George likes to deny it, Dream is a much better driver than he is), and so his mind eagerly welcomes sleep the moment his eyes fall shut.

He barely registers the shower turning off in the background, the fresh, clean lemon scent of the soap that George uses. The mattress dips, and all Dream does is fall further into sleep.

After a moment, George whispers, "Dream?"

Dream doesn't respond. George asks, "Are you awake?"

Dream doesn't respond, again. He doesn't think he could get his mouth to cooperate even if he could acknowledge that he's awake.

George swallows thickly, and he says, "Your hair looked really pretty today. In the sunlight. I wanted to touch it."

He doesn't say anything for a while, and right as Dream is on the verge of sleep, hushed: "If I wanted to kiss you, would you kiss me back?"

Dream falls asleep.

When he wakes up, he almost convinces himself it was a dream.

The car breaks down.

"You have to be fucking kidding me," says Dream flatly.

George slams the hood and slumps against the side of it. "We'll have to wait for someone to come so we can jump it."

Dream looks up at the sky and lifts a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. "We'll be stuck here forever."

"Could be five minutes or five hours, whenever a car willing to stop by helps." George wipes a hand across his brow and groans. "It's so fucking hot. This is awful."

Sweat trickles in a thin line down to the small of Dream's back and he already feels the faint itching of a sunburn spread across the back of his neck. They're barely through the top half of California, steaming in the summer heat. He feels boiled alive.

Dream goes to open the trunk and drags their cooler out. Inside, the ice has kept some of their things perfectly chilled, and George gratefully clutches an ice cold water bottle.

George tilts his head back, sweaty and tired, and Dream feels his stomach drop.

He doesn't know what to make of it: that night, a week ago, George's voice in the silent room. The way they had woken up, unconsciously turning to face each other in the dead of night, close enough to touch.

Would you kiss me back?

Dream's turned the words over in his head endlessly, so many times that they might as well be meaningless. *Would you kiss me back?* His heart does a funny half leap, half skip in his chest whenever he looks at George. He can't stop his eyes from straying to him. He can't stop thinking about kissing him. Running his hands over him, over every last inch of him. Marking his collarbones or thighs in red. Fuck, even holding his hand. Tracing careful lines down his arm. His heart is going to beat right out of his chest with how close he wants to be to George. Pressing himself ever closer.

Fuck, he would kiss him back. Every second of every day of every week.

Of course he would.

One car passes in a blaze of dust and sand, and barely looks at them, much less offers to stop and help. George lets his hand drop with a sigh. Dream drags himself back to the suffering present.

"Is there a gas station in walking distance?"

"Maybe," Dream says, "But it's a hundred degrees and you could walk for an hour and not find one."

"Are you getting any cell service?"

Dream shakes his head. George sighs and settles back against the hood of the car.

Sweat beads at Dream's temple. It's nearing the hottest hours of the day, where the afternoon sun is at its most dangerous. Dream switches places with George and holds his thumb up whenever a car passes. Slowly, surely, the afternoon trickles away. The sun lowers steadily, lengthening the shadows. Finally, nearly three hours after their van first crawled to a stop, gasping its last breath, a car comes.

George, who is on *thumb up duty*, is the one who gets him to pull over. In a bright blue pickup truck, the guy wears a wide brimmed straw hat. He's weathered and tan and pulls out jumper cables before Dream and George can even begin to grab theirs.

He smiles. "Rough place to get stuck, huh?"

"Tell me about it," grouses George. "It's awfully hot."

Dream reaches inside the car to pop the hood. George grabs one of the cables and goes to the other guy's car.

"I'm Jonathan," the guy says, sticking a hand out. George shakes it. "Have you ever jumped a car before?"

"Yeah," George says. "A few times with my mom."

"You must be pretty good at it then," the guy says, with a flash of a smile.

"I've had lots of practice," George says, oblivious to the end.

Conversationally: "So where are you guys headed? Anywhere special?"

"Heading upstate," George says. Somewhat evasively. "Nowhere particular."

Jonathan nods knowingly. "Summer road trip, right?"

Dream scowls.

George nods, friendly to the end.

Jonathan continues, "Any plans for later today?"

George attaches the last cable to their battery, and he motions for Dream to get inside the driver's seat. "Not much."

He attaches the last cable to the battery and motions for Dream to get inside the driver's seat.

"Start it," Jonathan calls, and Dream turns the key in the ignition. The first time, the car stays silent; the second time, it growls to life. Cool reassurance floods through Dream. George grins and disconnects the jumper cables. The guy wraps them back up, sticks them in the trunk of his car, and slams the door.

"You have enough gas to get to the next station?"

"Yeah," George says, relief evident in his voice. "Just the battery. Thank you, we really appreciate it."

Dream turns on the air conditioning, reveling in the breath of fresh air it provides, and fights to keep his hands steady on the wheel.

"I hope things are easy going from here on out," the guy says. "I could give you my number if you ever need it."

Jonathan is still smiling, with his stubbornly white teeth.

"Thanks," George says, taking a practiced step back, "But I'm good, we need to get going."

Jonathan mirrors him, says a few more words of acknowledgement that Dream filters out. The pickup truck disappears in a wave of summer dust and dirt. Dream watches it go, dust settling thickly over everything, over every last word and smile and frown.

George hops into the car, turns the air conditioning another notch. Brusquely, Dream says, "Ready?"

George clicks his seatbelt into place and gives him a thumbs up. Without another word, Dream turns onto the highway, a touch more aggressively than need be. George furrows his brow but says nothing.

After a minute, Dream's frustration only mounts. The tension in the car is thick enough to cut through with a knife. George sighs, put upon impatience.

"What?"

Dream rolls down his window, air rushing past, and says nothing.

George sighs. "Fine. I'll bite. What's going on?"

"Do you have any survival instincts?"

It's not what George must have been expecting, because he's startled into silence for a moment.

Then he retorts, “Don’t answer my question with more questions.”

“He wanted to give you his number,” Dream says, “He asked where you were going. Where you had been. What your plans were for later that day. Did it ever cross your mind that strangers can be dangerous?”

“He jumped our car,” George points out. “We would’ve been stuck otherwise. I’ll make polite conversation if that’s what it takes for us to keep moving.”

“You’re oblivious,” Dream mutters darkly.

“You’re paranoid,” George retorts.

“At least one of us knows when we’re being flirted with.”

George stops, mouth open to say something back, and snaps it shut. “What?”

Dream looks at him. “Are you serious?”

“I—” George frowns, bemused, “That’s flirting?”

Dream reaches a hand across the console and flicks his forehead. “Yes. You really are oblivious.”

“But he wasn’t doing anything that people do when they flirt,” George argues, cheeks a little red, “Don’t people say things— things other than—”

Dream raises an eyebrow. “Things like what?”

“I don’t know,” George says, fumbling for words. “Isn’t flirting more aggressive than that?”

“Aggressive?”

George scowls. “You know what I mean.”

Some of Dream’s irritation bleeds out. It’s not his fault that George is so dumbly oblivious to romantic cues, not when he’s spent the last two years being stubbornly ignorant to Dream’s every move.

“Flirting is different for everyone,” Dream explains, feeling like a preschool teacher, “But body language, smiling, all of that, it’s textbook.” Belatedly: “Everything that guy was just doing.”

“I wasn’t flirting with him,” George says. “Is that why you’re so upset?”

Dream can nearly see the wheels turning in his head, churning out answers and explanations and anxieties. Before George manages to piece everything together, Dream interrupts him.

“I want you to be safe,” he says, ignoring the jealousy roaring inside his stomach, a monster demanding to be fed. “And that wasn’t being safe.”

“I can take care of myself.” He sounds impatient.

“I know,” says Dream.

“Then why—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dream says. Because it truly doesn’t. Take the hint, George, take it.

George opens his mouth again, looking for all the world like a child with puzzle pieces that he stubbornly can't fit together. Dream looks back to the windshield and tries not to let his anxiety run away with him.

Would you kiss me back?

It's haunting.

Dream doesn't even know what to think.

Driving through the mountains is a whole new form of torture.

George is driving, thankfully, because Dream doesn't think he would be able to keep his hands still if he was tasked with the job of keeping them both on the mountainside. There's a roadside barrier to his right, on the passenger seat, and Dream risks a glance over the edge and his stomach drops.

Shit, Dream thinks, and his mind is abruptly plagued with the image of wheels skittering off the side, tumultuous and falling, and he doesn't notice how hard his hand is gripping his side until conversationally, George says, "Are we almost done with *A Wrinkle in Time*?"

Dream forcibly drags himself back to the present.

"What?" he manages.

"The book," George says, calmly. "That we've been reading. We're on the last chapter, right?"

Almost dizzy, almost lightheaded, Dream says, "I think so?"

"Do you want to read it?"

Dream closes his eyes briefly, right as George takes a turn, and tries to still his beating heart. "Do you want me to?"

"Why not?" George says, and without taking his eyes away from the road, points to the glovebox. "It'll keep me focused."

With what feels like numb hands, Dream fumbles for the book, pages worn down and tired. George has helpfully dog-eared the page they left off on last. It takes a while for his spinning, nauseated mind to focus on the print, but finally Dream clears his throat and begins, voice shaky, "*Meg could see nothing, but she felt her heart pounding with hope...*"

George hums, adjusts his hands, and directs them towards steady ground.

What feels like an eternity later, Dream finally reads, "*Then there was a whirring, and Mrs Whatsit, Mrs Who, and Mrs Which were standing in front of them, and the joy and love were so tangible that Meg felt that if she only knew where to reach she could touch it with her bare hands.*"

"Mrs Whatsit said breathlessly, 'Oh my darlings, I'm sorry we don't have time to say good-bye to you properly. You see, we have to—'

"But they never learned what it was that Mrs Whatsit, Mrs Who, and Mrs Which had to do, for

there was a gust of wind, and they were gone. ”

He closes the book.

Somewhere in the last thirty minutes between him beginning the final few pages and him reading out the last word, the road has straightened and they’ve left the curves of the mountainside behind. The valley they’re in stretches flat, for miles now.

“The end,” Dream says. In case George hadn’t gotten the memo.

George’s idea to have Dream distract himself from the heights by reading was a wonderful idea. He feels much more grounded now, after losing himself in an entirely different world for a few minutes. And now looking out the window, he sees nothing but equal heights. They’ve left the cliffs behind.

George looks out the window, eyebrows knitted together, free knee bouncing slightly, and then he says, “What kind of an ending is that?”

“Hm?”

“It ended,” George says, and gestures with a hand, “But it doesn’t explain anything.”

“That’s the point,” Dream says. It’s been a long time since he has read *A Wrinkle in Time*, and yet he appreciates it every time. It’s a wonderful ending. One of the best he’s ever read.

“But what did they have to do?” George says, slightly frustrated. “Why was it so sudden?”

“That’s the point,” Dream says. “You have to figure it out for yourself.”

“It’s a great book, sure,” George says, “But none of it makes sense.”

Again, Dream says, “That’s the point. It’s very symbolic. It’s all about love and family.”

“I just wish there was more,” George says. “I want to know what happens.”

“There are sequels, I think. But the original is best.”

“Hm.”

Dream glances over at him. The sunlight comes in from Dream’s window, and so George is perfectly lit up. The color of the sun tonight is pink, pinker than the hibiscus and oleander flowers that grow around Dream’s porch at home. It makes George look less pale than he actually is.

“I don’t understand,” George says again. “How did Meg loving Charles make him come back?”

“Because it’s love,” Dream says. “It doesn’t have to have a logical explanation, does it?”

“I guess not,” George says. “But—”

“You don’t have to read into it that deeply,” Dream says. “It’s just a book.”

“But that’s not how love works,” George says. Quieter. As if he’s struck a nerve. “Because—”

He cuts himself off abruptly. Dream pauses, book in his lap slipping to the floor. Forgotten.

Curiously: “What do you mean?”

“Because I don’t think love works like that,” George says, voice tight. “If it did, couldn’t I just— couldn’t I just love who I love? And everything would work itself out?”

“It’s a work of fiction,” Dream says, almost uncomprehendingly.

“I don’t think love can solve everyone’s problems like that,” George says.

“Maybe you just haven’t met the right person yet,” Dream dares to say.

The silence that falls over the two of them is thick and fraught with tension. Dream, desperately, wishes that he had just stayed silent, because he can see the cogs turning in George’s head, trying to churn out an answer.

Finally, George says, “I don’t know.”

Dream says nothing.

George continues, so quietly that Dream can barely hear, “I think I might have already, though.”

The sun continues to set.

Neither of them speak for the rest of the evening.

The bottle of vodka makes a dramatic reappearance fifty miles into the wilderness. Dream, who pours some into their matching shot glass sets, has already taken his first shot. It burned momentarily, and then the warmth spread from his chest. He offers a drink to George, not expecting anything much, but George gives it a considerable shrug and takes the smallest sip. His face scrunches up in distaste and Dream snorts, taking the rest of the shot back.

George shuffles closer, the plaid quilt over both their legs, and his ankle bumps against Dream’s. He radiates heat, warming Dream just from being close.

It’s the twelfth of August, the best day to see the Perseids. In the middle of the California desert, with the only light around from their headlights, the stars are so bright that the Milky Way is visibly splashed across the sky.

Dream can point out the majority of constellations now, spattered across the sky. Orion’s Belt stands out. Pisces is vibrant against the dark. Cygnus, the swan, flies through the sky. He points out the Pleiades, unusually bright. George directs his finger toward Mars, glowing red. If the sky gets dark enough, they’ll be able to see Jupiter tonight.

Dream drops his hand, and George takes it. Wordlessly, he interlaces their fingers and circles Dream’s knuckles with his thumb.

They have been holding hands a lot lately. It’s new. It’s... nice.

George is the one who starts it, most of the time. When they’re walking down the street. Across the console as they’re driving. Watching shitty reality TV in motels.

Dream doesn’t know how to feel about it. His body does, though; he has to breathe manually when George is close to him, has to focus on each of his steps to ensure he’s not tripping over his own

feet. He can't stop his mind from spinning in dizzying circles, trying to make sense of George, of every one of his actions. He bounces between the idea that George likes him, that George doesn't, that everything about George is platonic, that, miraculously, it isn't.

Dream looks down at their hands and thinks about George, George, everything about him, his hair and eyes and smile and laugh and heart and the constellations he teaches Dream and the way that Dream knows Cygnus by heart now, because he can draw Cygnus on his thigh from freckles. He thinks about George's fingers, soft, tiptoeing across him. Thinks about how everything he really wants is tearing at him, ripping him apart at the seams, and soon he'll be leaving from their conversations in pain. He's already in pain.

The alcohol slides at his mind, loosely tugging away at all his defenses.

Into the silence, George says, "I'm really glad we did this."

"Me too."

"One more month," he says. "This month is going to be the best one yet."

"Yeah?"

"Mhm," he says.

Two stars wink into existence. Dream checks his phone; as soon as night falls, the Perseids should bloom above them. The sky is quickly dissolving into inky blackness. Any minute now.

Three more minutes pass in slow silence, sand dripping away through an hourglass. Dream's about to check his phone again for the time when George exclaims, "Look!"

He follows George's pointing finger up to the flash of a comet, trailing across the sky. Another one joins it. Another, then another, then another. The sky lights up piece by piece, coming alive in glorious shooting stars.

"We have the best view," George breathes, eyes fixed on the sky.

"Yeah," Dream agrees, eyes fixed on George. "We do."

George turns to look at him, before Dream looks away, and Dream's face goes hot at being caught staring. George doesn't say anything on it, only moves just barely closer to him, leaving a scant inch between their thighs. He's warm. He makes Dream feel more alive, just from being next to him.

"This really is wonderful," George murmurs. "They're supposed to be really bright this year. I can't wait to see."

"It's already started."

George's bright, loopy smile. "It's barely been a minute."

"You know what I mean," Dream says.

"It'll only get better from here."

One of them shifts, or both, and suddenly their legs are pressed together in one long line from hip to ankle, and without meaning to, or maybe completely intentionally, George's head rests on Dream's shoulder. A fine shiver runs from the base of his neck all the way down his spine, and

from the way George goes still for a moment, Dream doesn't think that he's missed it.

"Are you cold?" George asks curiously.

Dream shakes his head. "Maybe a little."

"Hm."

Then George does the most audacious thing he's done in a while, which is—

Shifts closer to Dream, puts his legs in Dream's lap, tilts his head against Dream's chest, and the plaid quilt covers them both evenly. Dream's arm, George directs around his shoulder. There they sit, entangled.

"Is this okay?" George asks.

"Mhm."

"Are you warmer now?"

I hate you, Dream says, *I hate you so, so much that all I feel is love*, only it comes out, "Yes."

"Good."

The bottle of vodka slides against Dream's thigh, clinks against a rock on the ground. Suddenly, Dream *really* wants a drink. He wants something to make this night more bearable.

"Drink with me," he says.

He doesn't expect George to say yes, but surprisingly, George says, "Pour me a shot, then."

It takes a bit of maneuvering, but Dream manages to pass George a brimming shot of vodka as well as pour one of his own without spilling a drop, and without shifting their position. In the darkness, George's eyes are as dark as coffee. Black with one sugar, just the way George likes his.

"What are we drinking to?" George asks.

Without thinking, Dream says, "New memories."

The slightest smile, pressed into George's lips like the indent of a fingernail. "To new memories, then."

"To new memories," Dream echoes. They drink at the same time. The alcohol spreads through Dream's stomach, resonating sleepy warmth. The bitterness follows, but Dream barely registers it.

George grimaces, chasing the shot with water. "Alright. That's it for me, I'm done drinking."

"So soon?"

George shakes his head, cheeks flushed. "I'm not much of a drinker."

"Clearly," Dream says. George laughs, a little giddy, a little looser than he would usually be. Dream caps the bottle and puts it away. He's likely done for drinking too. Already, he has the slight sense of the world spinning around him, even though he's certainly sitting still.

Neither of them speak for a time. They're just waiting, watching the sky burst to life overhead.

“You know,” George whispers, like he’s sharing a secret, “I think you’re one of the best people I’ve ever met.”

Dream’s heart skips. “I think you’re pretty cool too.”

“Really,” George insists. “I know I’ve said it before, but I’m so glad I’m doing this with you.”

“Me too,” Dream says, and he wants to say more, but George seemingly pulls the words from his mouth before he can say anything worthwhile.

“It’s so nice,” George says, “Almost perfect, but…” And he trails off, like he’s said something without meaning to.

“Almost perfect?”

“Sorry,” George says, “I think I’m drunk.” He giggles, smiles wide. “Just a little bit, though.”

He’s gorgeous.

And he’s so close.

And he’s so, so warm.

The sky is alive with stars, blanketing them both, Dream swallows his pride and fear and decides that anything, even rejection, would be better than this awful, awful longing.

“George,” he says, heart thudding impossibly loud, drowning all other sounds, “Kiss me?”

For a shattering moment, George blinks at him and says nothing. Dream opens his mouth again, maybe to offer an explanation, maybe to apologize, maybe to take it back, but no words come out because George presses his lips to Dream’s.

He kisses like he talks: passionate, ardent, soft, beautiful. Kisses with the reckless abandon that Dream loves. It lasts for both a second and an eternity, simultaneously ageless and over too soon. Dream draws back, needing air, needing to make sure that everything is real, that he’s not just living out the most vivid dream in ages, but all he sees is George and the sky and endless, endless stars overhead.

“Finally,” George says breathlessly, “I was so worried, for the longest time…”

He doesn’t finish his sentence. George looks up at Dream, flushed and radiant, and Dream demands, “Kiss me again,” and George does.

Dream cups George’s jaw with one hand, steadies himself with the other. It’s so much better than he could have possibly imagined, so much more real, puzzle pieces clicking into place with satisfying certainty. George hums, curling his hands into Dream’s hair, kisses him harder. The world sings with them, glorious and colorful and happy.

Above them, the Perseids blaze through the sky, streaks of orange and red and gold.

They spend a lot more time on the road.

They spend a lot more time kissing.

In the car. Outside the car. On motel beds and in motel bathrooms. Under streetlights, in laundromats. George hops on top of the washer and lets Dream slot himself between his legs. A woman with two kids gives them a scandalized look, mutters something slanderous under her breath. Dream and George pay her no mind.

George's film camera becomes less pictures of the landscape and more pictures of Dream. Tufts of blond hair peeking out from blankets. Scabbed knuckles holding the driver's wheel, resting out the window. Two socked feet hooked over the other. A s'more, half burned and dripping chocolate over warm fingers. The back of his head under fluorescent gas station lights. Rare smiles captured from the driver's seat.

Slowly, their collection grows. Dream writes more poems, George tapes them up, even the bad ones. Brochures from the Portland Japanese Garden, Crater Lake though Dream gets vertigo from peering over the edge, the bottom door of the Space Needle in Seattle (Dream refused to get in the elevator to go all the way up). George buys a two dollar geode in an Oregon gift shop just to split it open on the side of the road.

"For you," he says, and passes Dream a half moon of rock. Glittery white crystals line the inside. George ties his own half to an increasingly heavy mobile in the back, that they made with their Junior Ranger badges and bits of sea glass from Floridian beaches and pink, smooth conch shell pieces and ten-cent stamps from a roadside stop.

"One day that's going to fall," Dream says. The hanging mobile spins, clinking together in bits and pieces.

"Sure," George agrees easily. "In twenty years, maybe."

He finishes tying the geode up, and it spins like a top, around and around and around.

At night, Dream tugs George towards him until he's sitting firmly over his hips and leans up to kiss him. The muffled sound that emerges from George's throats is slow and drawn out, sending a hot pulse of wanting down Dream's spine.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Dream mumbles against his lips. "You can make noise."

George pauses for a moment, licks his lips in a way that makes Dream's heart skip a beat. "I— it's odd."

He shifts his weight. Dream braces hands on George's thighs. "Are you still good? Still okay?"

"Yeah," George breathes, "I'm good. I've just... this is all so new to me."

The position they're in suddenly feels nearly obscene, too intimate. Dream takes his palm away from George. The *yes* floating between them feels thready, uncertain.

"I'm not forcing you to do anything," Dream says. His stomach twists in sick knots. "Am I?"

"No, no," reassures George, "You're not, I want this. I want *you*. I like everything we're doing, I promise."

The soft, melting look on George's face is nearly too much to bear, and Dream kisses it off him.

He doesn't think he'll ever get tired of kissing him.

As if testing the waters, George hums, low and slow, and Dream swallows the noise. His hand finds his way to the edge of George's waistband, traces lines, and George makes the sweetest sound Dream's ever heard. Dream hides his smile of satisfaction in the curve of George's neck, and drinks in the sounds he makes, thick and sweet as syrup.

The morning is slow, moving like molasses. They wake up curled into each other like flower petals, the heat of George imprinted against Dream's skin. He doesn't know where his body ends and where George's begins, and they untangle themselves beneath the morning sun.

"Alright," George says, hair a tousled mess, once he takes the wheel for once, "Do you have the map?"

Dream unfolds it from the glovebox. He traces a line down the dotted marks they've made in bright orange pen, the last time they looked at this map. They're heading past Idaho (a useless state, filled with Nazis) and they're skipping the Dakotas (equally empty states). They'll stop at Wyoming for Yellowstone, if they want, but George says that he only wants to see Old Faithful erupt and they can skip the rest.

"Head east on the highway," Dream says. "If we only stop for food breaks, we should make it to Nebraska by nighttime."

They kiss under the moon. They hold hands over the console. Dream traces the lines of George's arm, wrist to shoulder. He looks at their hands and wonders how two people could be made to fit together so evenly.

I think we were made for each other, the ghost of George's voice whispers.

One week passes, then a second. States drift by in bits and pieces. Under the universe, they exist solely for each other.

He doesn't think he's ever been this happy.

Rain patters against the windshield in gentle rivulets. The windshield wipers squeak. Their radio, issuing static for the last hour and a half, is turned off.

"Should we just stop here for the night?"

Dream considers it; they have another half hour until their supposed motel and night is thick and heavy over the highway. They've driven through the night before, mostly because Dream didn't trust the town they were in and George wasn't tired enough to sleep.

“Why not?” he says eventually. They won’t have to go outside, and they can just keep the heat on. George will keep him warm too, he runs hot. He always does.

They pull over to the side of the road. The rain doesn’t lighten up, but it remains a constant sprinkle. It’s soothing, and Dream changes into sweatpants and a loose shirt that may or may not belong to George. He climbs onto the mattress in the back, and George joins him, just a moment later.

They shift together, malleable and soft. George’s arm is over Dream’s stomach, interlaces with his hand. His back, touching his chest. His breath, warm against his ear. George holds him. Dream likes it.

It takes George five minutes, give or take, before he speaks.

“What are we?”

Dream’s stomach jolts, falls, drops. He doesn’t know why the trepidation in George’s voice makes him feel so anxious, but there’s something tentatively edging at his tone that makes Dream uncomfortable.

Quietly, Dream says, “What do you mean?”

George’s hand, interlaced with his own. He lets go of Dream’s hand to gesture to the van, decorated with all of their things. Their home for the last two months.

“When all of this is over, what happens next?”

“I’m going to college,” Dream says, almost uncomprehendingly. “You’ll go to college too.”

“But with us,” George says. “What happens to us?”

Dream rolls over, and they look at each other for a moment. Their noses are close enough to touch.

“We stay together,” Dream says, though he sounds uncertain. “If you wanted.”

“Even when we’re on opposite sides of the country,” George says. “Even when we don’t see each other for months?”

“Yes,” Dream says. “Even when.”

“I’ve never felt like this,” George whispers, and the insecurity, so hidden before, floods his voice, “Not with anyone. And I don’t—I don’t know what I would do, if—”

“George,” Dream says, pouring as much sincerity into his voice as he can, “These last few days, I’ve never been this happy. I always want to be this happy. And I always want to be with you.”

George doesn’t say anything, and Dream brings two fingers up to his chin and taps his nose. “Are you okay?”

George nods shakily, and he says suddenly, “Fuck all the other parallel universes.”

Dream cocks his head.

“I love this one,” George whispers. “I want to stay here.”

Dream nods feverishly, and he echoes, “I want to stay here.”

With you, with you, with you.

George leans forward and kisses Dream's forehead. Warmth radiates from that spot.

The entire night, neither of them shift.

They make it to their fifth disposable camera, because the previous four are filled solely with George's snapshots of Dream.

Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts pass by. They go to Times Square for the thrill of it. They buy a soft pretzel in Philadelphia and tear it in even halves to split it. They buy tickets to the Museum of Natural History in D.C., and get trapped inside when a thunderstorm strikes.

"It's you," George says, pointing at a bronze statue of a rodent. Dream side eyes him, bends closer to read the plaque.

"It's a *Morganucodon oehleri*," he reads. "It's one of the earliest known mammals."

"It reminds me of you," George says.

"What, because it's a rat?"

"Yeah, and ugly too."

Dream pushes his shoulder and has to turn away to hide his laugh.

"That's you," he says a few moments later, pointing at a carbon copy of a Neanderthal.

"Why, because I'm short?"

"No, because you're ugly."

George scowls, but it's brimming with fondness. "I hate you so much."

"It's not my fault that it's your spitting image," Dream says. "See, it even has the bad posture."

Unconsciously George rolls his shoulders back and straightens his spine. "Please stop calling me out like that."

Dream pokes him in the small of his back. "Never. Not until you manage to sit up straight."

George curls his lip at him, but he can't keep the expression long before he breaks into a smile. He grabs Dream's hand and tugs him onward. The Smithsonian has endless rooms for them to lose themselves in.

In the motel the night before they're set to arrive back home, neither of them talk for a long time.

The future feels airy and strange and full of dramatic questions, too big to be answered in one night. For now, Dream and George fold into each other, a card house unable to fall, wrists and legs and divots curving in perfectly with each other. Dream presses his head into the crook of George's neck and breathes.

"It's going to be weird going back home," George says quietly. With the lamp off, the only light comes from the city outside. His hair is dark, eyes nearly black. "Sleeping in my own bed is going to feel weird."

"I'll have to put up with Sapnap again," Dream mumbles, and fights back the urge to shudder at the eventual comments about him and George.

"Ew," George says, "Sapnap."

Dream snorts. "I'll wake up in the mornings and wonder why we're not driving."

"I'm going to eat so much fresh fruit," George sighs. "I'll go through a pound of strawberries a day."

"Ice cream," Dream fantasizes. "And ice cold drinks."

"I'll sleep in so late," George says, "Now that we won't have to keep moving every day."

"And we'll have guaranteed air conditioning every single day."

"It'll be so nice," George breathes.

Silence, and then:

"It'll also be so different."

"In a good way, though," Dream says. "Right?"

It takes George a moment to respond, and then he nods.

"Right."

In the morning, they take extra time packing up their clothes and suitcases, and instead of pushing them anywhere they fit, divide them into *Dream* and *George's* sides. It's going to make it easier when they have to split their belongings back in Orlando.

The strangest thing happens when they have to pack their suitcases though, and it's the realization that half of George's things are Dream's, and half of Dream's things are George's. They sort through sweatpants and sleep-shirts and frayed jeans and sweaters until everything is mostly evened out. Dream keeps George's shirt, the pink one from the Graceland mansion. George keeps Dream's hoodie, the one they bought at the visitor's center in the Smithsonian. It's decided without any words.

It takes longer for them to get on the road. There's two hours left in their journey. Dream wants to make them stretch as long as possible. In the end, the hours speed by like grains of sand slipping through his fingers. The minutes pass by and drip through the cracks until the turn off for their small neighborhood in Orlando approaches.

George takes the final stretch while Dream watches the scenery pass by in flashes of gold, green, yellow. The highway transforms from unfamiliar to recognizable. That exit leads to a coffee shop,

the next one to Waffle House. The gas station off the freeway there never carded Dream when he bought alcohol in junior year. Two streets and a traffic light over is the shelter he volunteered at during the last semester of senior year.

“We’ll go to your house first,” George says. “That sound good?”

“Mhm.”

Dream sees the street signs flash by, neighborhoods he recognizes, trees he’s seen bear fruit for the first time, coffee shops that pop up and vanish within the year. The sidewalks that have held his footsteps in his hands. There’s the turn for Lakeside High, and in a few blocks, they’ll be at Dream’s house.

He feels antsy, fingers tapping on the window. George’s hands are steady on the wheel, following the traffic laws with precise certainty.

He doesn’t know why he’s so anxious. He’s coming home. He doesn’t know why it feels so jarring.

Lean into the discomfort, Dream thinks, and he says, “It’s weird to be back.”

“I know,” George readily agrees. “I guess... well, I thought things would change as much as I have. But everything still looks the same.”

“I almost wish it took longer.”

George huffs, a small laugh. “I know. Three months went by so fast.”

He turns the left blinker on, waits for a car to pass, and turns onto Dream’s street. He pulls to a stop in front of Dream’s house.

Silence falls. It’s thick, and Dream feels like he could chew it like taffy.

“Should we go in?” George says.

Dream says, “I want a few more minutes.”

Those few more minutes pass in silence. It’s broken only when Dream sees the curtain to the front window shift. He sees his mother open the window, push the curtain back, and grin broadly. She disappears from view, and Dream knows she’s going to unlock the front door in a moment.

“I think this is going to be a good year,” George says suddenly.

Dream turns to face him, looks at the sunlight streaming through the window, sunlight that traveled millions of miles purely to have the joy of shining on him. A riveting, gorgeous feeling swells in him suddenly, enough that Dream thinks it will spill out of him if it keeps growing.

“Yeah,” Dream says. “It is.”

Chapter End Notes

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